Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina

Tom Davis, Chairman

"Hurricane Katrina: The Role of the Department of Homeland Security"

Wednesday, October 19, 2005

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Room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman's Opening Statement

WITNESS LIST

The Honorable Michael Chertoff
Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for
and Response to Hurricane Katrina
October 19th, 2005

Good morning, and welcome to the Select Committee’s third hearing on the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina.

On September 15, before this Select Committee was established by a bipartisan House vote, the Government Reform Committee held a hearing on the early lessons learned from Katrina. At that hearing, the Committee’s Ranking Member, Henry Waxman, said there were “two steps we should take right away.”

First, he said, we should request basic documents from the agencies. And second, he said – and I quote – “we need to hear from Michael Brown and Michael Chertoff. These are the two government officials most responsible for the inadequate response, and the Committee should call them to testify without delay.”

I’m happy to report that we haven’t delayed. We’ve met and exceeded these goals. We’re doing the oversight we’re charged with doing. While many who so urgently called on Congress to swiftly investigate have refused to participate and instead tilt at windmills, we’re investigating aggressively what went wrong and what went right.

And we – those on my side of the aisle, and those Democrats who agree we need to ask tough questions, together -- are doing it by the book, letting the chips fall where they may. I will continue to invite Democrats to join us. I will continue to give them full and equal opportunity to make statements and question witnesses and help guide the direction of our inquiry.

But regardless of who does and does not show up for our hearings, we have a job to do, and I’m intent on doing it right.

Our goal today is to understand the Department of Homeland Security’s role and responsibilities before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama on August 29, 2005.

I want to thank DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff for being here today so we can discuss the specific actions he took right before, during, and after the storm. His insight and perspective will be critical as we construct the narrative that will serve as the foundation of our final report.

Although the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Michael Brown have received the most attention from Members of Congress, state and local officials, and the news media in Katrina’s wake, DHS and Secretary Chertoff have primary responsibility for managing the national response to a catastrophic disaster, according to the National Response Plan.
Three weeks ago we heard from Michael Brown. Today we’ll hear from his boss, the man who ultimately fired him.

We need to find out if Michael Brown had it right when he testified before our committee. Has FEMA been under-funded and under-staffed? Has it become ‘emaciated’? Did Congress undermine FEMA’s effectiveness when we folded it into DHS?

Michael Brown testified that he asked the Department for funding to implement the lessons learned from the Hurricane Pam exercise and that those funds were denied. He also testified about brain drain, diminished financial resources, and “assessments” of $70 to $80 million by DHS for DHS-wide programs. He said he wrote memos to Secretary Ridge and Secretary Chertoff regarding the inadequacy of FEMA’s resources. We will ask the Secretary about these assertions.

And regardless of his response, we are left with the question of whether any of this affected the government’s preparation for and response to Katrina.

We also need to establish the Department’s role and responsibilities in a disaster. What resources can the Secretary bring to bear? What triggers the decision to deploy those resources? During Katrina, how personally involved was Secretary Chertoff in seeking, authorizing, or deploying specific resources?

Michael Brown testified that he had “no problem picking up the phone and getting hold of [Secretary] Chertoff…” How many times during these difficult days did he make those calls? What did he ask for? What did he get?

Michael Brown also testified that he wished he’d called in the military sooner. Did that require Secretary Chertoff’s involvement? Did Mr. Brown ask the Secretary to seek military support? If so, when?

Over the past several weeks, we’ve all boned up on the disaster declaration process outlined in the Stafford Act. We understand the goals, structure and mechanisms of the National Response Plan. We’ve learned the alphabet soup of “coordinating elements” established by the Plan: the HSOC (“H-Sock”) and RRCC; JFOs and PFOs; the IIMG.

Now it’s our job to find out how this soup was served.

At the end of the day, we’ll tell a story about the National Response Plan, and how its 15 Emergency Support Functions were implemented with Katrina. We’ll see how well the ESFs were followed. Where there were problems, we’ll ask why. Where even flawless execution led to unacceptable results, we’ll have to return to questioning the underlying Plan.
The American people don’t care about acronyms or organizational charts. They want to know who was supposed to do what, when, and whether the job got done. And if it didn’t get done, they want to know how we are going to make sure it does the next time.

Americans know by now that there was no shortage of plans, no shortage of exercises. They know just as well that there was a profound failure to be proactive, a deep inability to execute. They understand this was a big, big storm. But they also understand that too many people viewed preparation and response as “someone else’s problem.”

Under the National Response Plan, the DHS Secretary is the federal official charged with declaring an Incident of National Significance. Part of that declaration is naming a Principal Federal Official, or PFO, to manage the response.

We only received a handful of the e-mails we requested to and from Mike Brown in time to prepare for this hearing. We were disappointed, to say the least, that a congressionally mandated committee, with subpoena power, has had to wait this long on a seemingly simple request. The bulk of the documents we requested did not arrive until late last night. It’s this sort of inadequate responsiveness to requests for information that has long frustrated many of our Members, and perhaps sheds some light on the Department’s woeful response to Katrina.

But, from the handful of Mike Brown’s emails we did received in a timely manner, we know that he resented being named the PFO by the Secretary. What does the Secretary have to say about that? What does this say about the underlying Plan?

Finally, we hope today to ask Secretary Chertoff what we’re asking all officials as part of our investigation. Where were you in the days and hours right before, during, and after the hurricane? What were you doing? Who were you talking to? Establishing this timeline will be a key part of the story we end up telling in our report.

Based on the information we have gathered so far – and we have much, much more to gather – it seems that all too often, local, state, and federal leaders were planning in a crisis environment. A lot of decisions that seemingly should have been made days or months or years before were being made on the fly, or not made at all.

That’s just not good government.

NYU Professor Paul Light wrote recently that “Mr. Chertoff is just about the only official in Washington who can say ‘I told you so’ about FEMA,” based on some of the reforms he outlined last July in his Second Stage Review. I wonder if Secretary Chertoff believes FEMA’s response to Katrina would have been better if the reforms had been in place on August 29th.
Interviewed by CNN on September 21st, Secretary Chertoff said it is his “responsibility to fix the things that don’t work well. That’s what we are in the process of doing right now.” Today we hope to hear his thoughts on exactly what didn’t work well with Katrina, and how the Department’s process of self-examination is proceeding.
STATEMENT OF SECRETARY MICHAEL CHERTOFF
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY
BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE
SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON KATRINA
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2005
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Introduction

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to address
you today as we discuss the response to Hurricane Katrina. Let me also thank Congress
for passing the Homeland Security Appropriations bill, which includes moving to a risk-
based approach.

In addition, I would like to thank the men and women of the Department of Homeland
Security – and in particular FEMA, the United States Coast Guard, and our other
operating components – who have been working around the clock to help millions of our
fellow Americans impacted by Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita.

In the span of one month, nature dealt two very significant blows to our Gulf Coast. As a
result of both Hurricane Katrina and Rita, many have lost loved ones and millions have
seen their lives uprooted and their livelihoods destroyed.

In particular, Hurricane Katrina will go down as one of the worst natural disasters in our
nation’s history. As a result of this storm, more than 1.5 million people evacuated the
Gulf Coast, nearly 250,000 homes have been damaged or destroyed, and over 1,200 lives
have been lost. An estimated 600,000 people have required sheltering, compared to just
180,000 people for the four Hurricanes that struck Florida in 2004.

For the hundreds of thousands of families who have lost their homes and their
communities as a result of Hurricane Katrina, we want to do everything we can as a
federal government to ease the burdens and the challenges of their ordeal.

We have a duty to these survivors, both as a government and a nation. We must care for
those who have lost everything – and help restore their hope and their control of their
lives. As President Bush made clear, “we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it
takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives.”

While the federal response to Katrina was unprecedented, it was certainly not without
flaws. All levels of government – federal, state, and local – should review what went
right and what went wrong with the initial Katrina response. Our shared goal must be to
replicate the things that went well – and to eliminate the things that did not.
Hurricane Katrina was the first large-scale test for the new National Response Plan that Congress as well as other federal, state, and local partners worked with our Department to create and implement over the past few years.

And it was by any measure an extraordinary test. The one-two combination of a catastrophic hurricane and massive flood overwhelmed the normal disaster relief system. Some things worked well. But there were shortcomings that we must urgently address.

This tragedy has emphasized how critical it is that we ensure our planning and response capabilities perform with seamless integrity and efficiency in any type of disaster situation – even one of cataclysmic nature.

Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of having accurate, timely and reliable information about true conditions on the ground, the lack of which frustrated our best efforts to coordinate the response with our state and local counterparts.

With Hurricane Rita, the federal response effort functioned much more efficiently – admittedly in a less extreme environment. Just two weeks out from Hurricane Katrina, improvements in communication and coordination between levels of government were already evident. But that is only one step in ensuring that we identify the lessons learned from Katrina and make the necessary adjustments.

At this time, there are a number of ongoing reviews – both internal and external examinations – ranging from a White House led government after action review to the work of this congressional panel. We have to learn the lessons of what happened, so we can make needed improvements.

Through this review process, DHS will continue to gather facts and information to pass along, but the reality is we don’t have to wait for the review’s completion to already identify and act upon specific ways we can adapt and improve.

**Response Highlights**

But before we make those changes, it is important to recognize that some aspects of the initial response actually exceeded our expectations.

Some of the very first images on television were of Coast Guard helicopters rescuing stranded citizens on rooftops and in rising floodwaters. These brave men and women performed selfless acts of courage, contending with high winds, flying debris and downed power lines. In all, the Coast Guard rescued more than 33,500 people in its response to Katrina – six times the number of people it rescued in all of 2004. At its peak, Coast Guard assets supporting the Katrina response totaled 65 aircraft, approximately 30 cutters, approximately 100 boats, and nearly 5,000 personnel.

In addition, the Transportation Security Administration helped organize “Operation Air Care,” the largest domestic civilian airlift ever in our nation’s history. More than 22,000
stranded evacuees were lifted to safety from the New Orleans Airport. These efforts were also supported by the Federal Air Marshal Service, the Department of Transportation, the Air Transport Association, and some of our nation’s largest air carriers.

Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement also provided a combined 1,300 law enforcement officers to New Orleans to help maintain order and protect critical assets until additional National Guard troops could be mobilized. And the United States Secret Service provided strategic aid and support at critical locations, including the Superdome in New Orleans and the Astrodome in Houston.

**FEMA**

By all measures, Hurricane Katrina was the largest natural disaster that FEMA has ever been called upon to support. Although FEMA pre-positioned significant numbers of personnel, assets and resources before the hurricane made landfall, we now know its capabilities were simply overwhelmed by the magnitude of this storm.

This should not take away from the hard work and dedication demonstrated by FEMA employees, who literally worked day and night supporting Katrina response and recovery efforts, and continue to do so.

To date, FEMA has provided almost $2.9 billion in vital disaster aid to more than 1.6 million affected households. That is in addition to millions of dollars in generous donations from other organizations and the American people.

FEMA also worked very hard to move evacuees from temporary shelters into transitional housing. The number of people now living in shelters has declined from more than 273,000 to less than 12,000 – a decrease of more than 95 percent – despite additions resulting from Hurricane Rita.

But we know there are many things that did not work well with the response. As we complete our after action review, we will have more comprehensive recommendations for improvements in our catastrophic preparedness and response capabilities. But today, let me mention three areas we can and must address immediately to begin the process of strengthening the system.

**Re-tooling FEMA**

One of the first things we must do is to re-tool FEMA and enhance this vital agency’s capabilities so that it can fulfill its historic and critical mission supporting response and recovery.

FEMA is not itself a first responder – but it does play a critical role in working with state and local first responders in their response and recovery efforts. State and local
authorities not only possess the intimate knowledge and understanding of their home communities and their response capabilities, but they have both the legal authority and constitutional responsibility to protect and provide for their own citizens. FEMA also plays an essential role in providing additional support in the weeks and months following an incident, such as individual disaster assistance and temporary housing.

FEMA must be better prepared to deal with all stages of a truly catastrophic event like Katrina. For the vast majority of natural disasters, FEMA’s current capabilities are sufficient to handle the needs of affected populations. We saw this in 2004 when FEMA responded to a record 68 major disasters, including 27 hurricane-related disasters in 15 states.

But with Katrina, these capabilities were pushed beyond the breaking point. FEMA must be prepared to anticipate both short-term and long-term needs of impacted communities. That includes having housing plans already in place for feeding and sheltering in excess of 500,000 evacuees, improving our system for rapid distribution of emergency funds, working with federal partners to develop effective anti-fraud measures, and having debris removal plans in place so that supplies are not held up because of impassible roads and so communities can more quickly begin rebuilding and repopulating impacted areas. State and local governments will need to have full awareness of how these capabilities link up with their efforts.

In Katrina, FEMA faced challenges in having full situational awareness of where the needs were greatest, getting supplies into affected areas, and tracking shipments of supplies to ensure that they reached the people who need them.

In all of these areas, we want to strengthen FEMA not just for its own sake, but so that we are more effective at helping our state and local partners better respond to and recover from catastrophic events. In strengthening FEMA, our goal is to keep authority at the state and local level, where it belongs.

**Building A 21st Century FEMA**

There are four specific areas where we would like to enhance FEMA’s capabilities in the short-term.

*Logistics*

FEMA’s system for moving supplies into a disaster area is not adequate for catastrophic events. Many parts of it are antiquated and inefficient. We must more effectively partner with the public and private sectors and tap into their expertise to overhaul our logistics system within FEMA.

We want to learn from and emulate successful distribution and delivery systems, such as major private sector shipping firms and public sector experts in the Department of
Defense. FEMA needs to have a “just-in-time” inventory and delivery system that allows it to quickly assess inventory, deliver those goods, and replenish its stocks.

Business Process Redesign

With regard to FEMA’s business processes, we need to ensure that FEMA has an effective operations plan in place to perform many of its key disaster assistance functions: answering the phone, registering people for assistance, and getting them the benefits they need. We need to strengthen FEMA’s management of the toll-free disaster registration hotline, including figuring out ways to rapidly expand call center capabilities in the event of a major catastrophe.

We also need to evaluate FEMA’s disaster registration processes and databases to make sure we have a high degree of confidence in those systems. We want to have the flexibility to use that information to provide a level of granular detail that enables us to make informed decisions about where to focus our attention and resources and how to better assist our state and local partners.

FEMA’s traditional disaster registration model, which encourages people to come to a fixed location to register for and receive aid, does not hold up when such a vast area is affected by a catastrophic event. One solution may be to have the ability to surge more people more quickly and dispersed more broadly in a disaster area – teams with the necessary training, equipment, and resources to operate in difficult circumstances.

We also need to ensure that FEMA has mature, solid contracting and procurement systems in place before a disaster – and that those systems include a special focus on procurement integrity.

Communications

Sufficient communications capabilities must also be in place and able to function during the worst phases of a hurricane or incident. The sheer force of Hurricane Katrina disabled many of the communications systems that state and local authorities and first responders rely upon to communicate with each other and with FEMA. This was not an issue of interoperability, but of basic operability resulting from wind, flooding, loss of power, and other damage to infrastructure.

In the future, FEMA must have its own increased communications capability so we do not face a similar situation. While satellite phones are helpful, they are not a panacea. We are looking at ways to adapt military and advanced private sector communication technology for emergency use – to help state and local first responders as well as FEMA support personnel.

Staffing
Finally, we know that any technological advancements we make would be meaningless if FEMA did not also have the necessary staff to manage these systems and operations.

Currently, FEMA has a very capable and well respected Acting Director in David Paulison. But FEMA must work to replenish its ranks at the senior level with experienced staff. In the coming weeks we will be working to draw talented and qualified individuals to these important positions.

**Information**

The second major area of improvement is enhancing our communications and information sharing capabilities. In any disaster, situational awareness requires real time access to accurate, first-hand information.

During the Katrina response, our efforts were significantly hampered by a lack of information from the ground. With communication systems damaged and state and local assets compromised by the subsequent flooding, our ability to obtain precise reporting was significantly impaired.

In the future, we need to consider how best to identify emerging issues and target resources if our traditional sources of information – state and local officials – are overwhelmed after a disaster.

Within current programs and resources, DHS is establishing emergency reconnaissance teams that will go in, in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, to help us get real time situational reporting of the facts on the ground and help prioritize resource requirements and focus our efforts.

These teams will consist of not only FEMA disaster assistance specialists – but also Coast Guard personnel, CBP, Secret Service, and other DHS law enforcement officers such as CBP, Secret Service, ICE and FPS, and other DHS assets. The DHS programs supporting these teams already possess their own communications and aerial surveillance capabilities, such as helicopters and P3 aircraft. Once in position, the teams will be able to relay up to the minute, dependable information on which authorities could act confidently.

**Preparedness**

Finally, let me say a few words about preparedness.

In July, one month before Katrina, I announced a new structure and strategy to revamp and bolster our preparedness work. I also testified before Congress on this new approach. This was part of an overall reevaluation of the Department known as the Second Stage Review, which I ordered earlier this year when I arrived at DHS.
In the area of preparedness, the Department of Homeland Security is charged with being an “all-hazards” agency – focused on the full range of capabilities to prevent, protect against, and respond to acts of terror or other disasters. I said in July – and I will say it again today – we are not where we need to be as a nation in the area of preparedness. At that time, we presented a specific plan for strengthening our capabilities in this area. Unfortunately, Katrina arrived just one month later.

But the way forward is still clear, and even more urgent. To ensure that our preparedness efforts have focused direction, we intend to fundamentally strengthen and elevate the role of preparedness in our efforts in three fundamental ways.

First, we must integrate the Department’s existing preparedness efforts -- including planning, training, exercising, and funding -- into a single directorate for Preparedness.

Preparedness is not just about response and recovery – rather, it must draw on the full spectrum – from prevention through protection to response. Our preparedness directorate will rely on the expertise of FEMA, but it will also integrate the experience of the Coast Guard, our Infrastructure Protection division, our intelligence units, and our other operational assets.

Under the Second Stage Review plan, FEMA will become a direct report to the Secretary, allowing it to focus on response and recovery while partnering with the new preparedness directorate to increase our overall capabilities in both of these important areas.

FEMA will continue operating within the unified incident command structure provided by the Department of Homeland Security and will have direct operational lines of support from its sister agencies, including the Coast Guard, ICE, CBP, TSA, and the Secret Service. FEMA must also continue to function as an all-hazards agency, leveraging entities within the preparedness directorate, including Infrastructure Protection, the Office of Domestic Preparedness, and State and Local Government Coordination.

Second, in light of Hurricane Katrina and at the direction of the President, we are also working with federal, state and local officials to review the emergency operations plans of every major American urban area and ensure that those plans are clear, detailed, and up-to-date. This includes specifically a hard, realistic look at evacuation planning ranging from earthquakes to subway bombings.

Through the preparedness directorate, we will devote unprecedented resources and focus on ensuring that we have effective plans – and the necessary federal, state, and local training to execute those plans – for a variety of scenarios that we might face.

Third, funding must be tied to risk – and to results. Moving forward, these plans, along with our National Preparedness Goal, which was released in April as an interim goal and will be finalized in the coming months, will help form our standard in allocating future DHS grants to our state and local partners, so that we build the right capabilities in the right places at the right level. Federal money should be distributed using this risk-based
approach – an approach we must apply to all preparedness activities. DHS needs the discretion to award infrastructure protection grants in a more flexible and disciplined manner, as provided by the administration’s proposed Targeted Infrastructure Protection Plan.

These steps are just the beginning and in the weeks and months ahead, we will move forward to build our preparedness capability and ensure that the United States is ready to meet any type of threat or disaster we may face.

Conclusion

These are initial recommendations to begin to address some of the issues we witnessed during the Katrina response. As our own internal review continues, we will return with more comprehensive recommendations.

We also stand ready to work with this panel, Congress, and other stakeholders to incorporate outside findings and suggestions into how we can improve our preparedness capabilities going forward.

Again, I thank the Committee for your aid in this effort and look forward to working with you in the coming months.